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Quebec backs 'muzak' album to tune of $130,000

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
of The Gazette

The Quebec government has gone into the business of "muzak" — the somnambulent background music piped into apartment and office buildings, shopping centres and waiting rooms — with a thudding fanfare.

This week a 6-disc boxed record set of *Musique du Quebec* — containing 108 "easy-listening" tunes composed by Quebecers — started hitting the stores at $49.99 a pop.

It's a product of the curious melange of politics, private enterprise, government and showbusiness one finds these days in Quebec. And, whether it's as well-produced as the American product, it's the music millions of Quebecers will be hearing.

With production costs of $130,000, the records were financed by the Quebec government under the auspices of the Editeur Officiel du Quebec (official printer) and Communications Minister Louis O'Neill, who said that Quebecers "have for a long time needed their own 'musicique d'ambience.'" The Quebec project also received a financial committment from the federally-run Radio-Canada International, which agreed to purchase 10,000 copies for distribution around the world.

The records "represent another step in the cultural liberation of Quebec," O'Neill explained at the celebrity-studded launching that's the lifeblood of the potent Quebecois star system.

As the music droned on in the background, the composers — including Clemence Desrochers, Richard Huet, Pauline Julien, Suzanne Stevens, Pierre Calve, Francois Guy, Pierre Letorneau, Gilles Valiquette, Michel Conte, Donald Lautrec, and Christian St. Roch — shuffled past the television cameras and gladhanded for the local paparazzi.

Quebecers have for long needed own 'musique d'ambiance'

— Louis O'Neill

But the man of the hour was Stephane Venne, the producer of this mood music. A 20-year veteran of the Quebec pop music scene, Venne has composed many songs for the likes of Quebec's Renee Claude, as well as organizing the Olympic song contest and subsequent recordings in 1976.

Venne received the mandate last year from the Editeur Officiel to produce the set of Quebecois easy-listening records that could compete with the multi-national Muzak corporation, cable companies and certain FM radio stations, whose Americanized sound wafts throughout office building elevators and corridors.

"In record industry terms," says Venne, "there was a need for a 'cover' version of Quebec hits. A big record will last about six months then go into the closet for six years and then die peacefully. The radio stations needed instrumental versions of the hits — they couldn't keep on relying on Andre Gagnon and Francois Dompierre forever."

The biggest task, says Venne, was actually choosing the songs. He consulted computer printouts, radio station playlists and record company sales to arrive at the decision. He mentions that ten of his own compositions could have qualified for the list, but they were removed for fear of conflict of interest.

Venne organized the mammoth project with an eye to cut costs. The budget for the records was $130,000, covering recording studio costs and payment of the 342 musicians employed for 18 three-hour sessions. The music was recorded at the St. Charles Studio in Longueuil, described by Venne as effectively the largest in the city, able to handle the large orchestral sessions required.

"We didn't have the budget to record layer by layer, each section separately," he says, "so we needed a large enough room to hold live sessions. Also, we had two or three mixing engineers live at the sessions to minimize what we had to do over."

Is Venne satisfied with the job?

"No matter how big you're working, there's always something you'd want to do differently. But I can say I'm 75 per cent satisfied — that's not a bad batting average."

Venne says he's ready to do the same thing for songs from the rest of Canada "if the various provinces and federal government agencies can decide whether to spend money on it."

The break-even mark for *Musique du Quebec* is 60,000 sales, 10,000 for each disc, in addition to the 10,000 already purchased by Radio-Canada International. After that, there's profit for Venne and the K.D. Music record company, headed by Gilles Talbot, the prominent Montreal impresario who's led numerous record company forays into business arrangements with the Quebec government.

Profit aside, it might have been wiser to present Quebec's composers and musicians in a better light by spending more time and money on sound and performance.

The easy-listening "muzak" formula is scientifically designed to go smooth on the ears, to cool the nerves when you're stuck in an elevator or waiting room. It's a subliminal but omnipresent part of Western life. The American formula for mood music is based on a smooth sound blend in which no one instrument has the slightest edge to it.

Musique du Quebec sounds as if the musicians raced through their two-and-a-half minute arrangements. The arrangements themselves often sound awkward, if not plain banal.

There was need for a 'cover' version of Quebec hits

— Stephane Venne

Quebec's most beloved composer, Felix Leclerc, is treated with a version of *Tour de l'ile* that begins with a painful violin motif straight out of B-movie tearjerkers and ends with a bombastic horn sound. Jean-Pierre Ferland's *Swingez vot' compagnie* sounds ricky-ticky, more fitting for a carnival.

The recording of Gilles Vigneault's happy tune, *Gens du pays*, which is often used at political rallies, is barely a cut above the run-of-the mill version played by a neighborhood marching band. *Tout les palmiers*, the contribution by the contemprary Beau Dommage group, starts off with a Tijuana Brass leitmotif, followed some slippery strings adorned by a nutty electric guitar sound. Nanette Workman's disco styled *Donne, donne* is glutted with a sleazy trombone solo wriggling its way through a florid string arrangement.

The renditions hardly do much for songs which already lose a lot of their meaning without lyrics. Lack of adequate recording and arrangement time seems to be at fault, as some of Montreal's best session musicians and arrangers were involved. And the sound quality is not up to snuff — some instruments sound as if they were recorded in an empty hallway — although it's difficult to say whether that can be detected in the tinny speaker systems through which piped-in music travels.

Defenders of the production can point to the fact that the Quebec record and radio market is not large enough to support a more expensive production.

"How much more calmed our nerves will be," says O'Neill, "if we Quebecois can hear our own music instead of something American."

You Be The Critic

Plugging away like an uninspired boxer . . . a hoarse voice like a worn-out carnival barker . . . *The Gazette's* writer/critic Juan Rodriguez certainly stirred up a hornet's nest with those not-too-flattering comments on rock star Rod Stewart's performance at the Forum on Wednesday night.

Rightly or wrongly, we've been inundated with hundreds of phone calls from irate fans looking for Rodriguez' blood.

We do not intend to satisfy such lust, but we do promise to give you, our faithful readers, a say on what our critics say in the future.

You do not have to confine yourself to pop music. All our critics will welcome your written comments — **Maureen Peterson** and **Bruce Bailey** (music and theatre), **Dave Chenoweth** (film), **David Sherman** and **Juan Rodriguez** (rock and pop), **Tom Schnurmacher** (TV-radio), **Linde Howe-Beck** (dance) and **Virginia Nixon (art).**

So keep in touch with *The Gazette* and let us have your comments — they can be scathing or congratulatory. You Be The Critic!

Due to pressure of space, not all letters can be published, but all will be considered. Send them to: You Be The Critic, Entertainments Dept., The Gazette, 1,000 St. Antoine, Montreal H3C 3E2.

Robert Gordon: 'We're getting into the visual thing a bit more.

Gordon's retro rock is height of fashion

"What I do," says retro-rock king Robert Gordon, "is so old that it's new to a lot of young people. I've got a wide audience — that's kind of rewarding in itself."

Gordon, who wears nifty 1950s styles and whose hairstyle shoots up from his head, is firmly aboard the retro fashion bandwagon. He says he's doing what he has loved since the age of 12, except now Gordon's evocative renderings of rock 'n' roll classics are hitting the big-time.

Last year, Gordon left the small independent record label Private Stock for RCA — the label that broke a fellow named Elvis Presley around the world nearly 25 years ago — and he's ready to "tackle all the work I can get."

Gordon was talking over the phone, waiting for a plane, on the home stretch of an exhaustive two-and-a-half month American tour of one-nighters that includes a stop at Montreal's Le Plateau next Saturday.

Although Bruce Springsteen wrote a song especially for him, *Fire*, that was subsequently turned into a hit by the Pointer Sisters, Gordon's desire is to strike stardom with old songs such as Conway Twitty's *It's Only Make Believe*. Twitty was a rock 'n' roller in 1959 when he put that out, and now he's a country star. RCA promoted the record in the country market and, lo and behold, Gordon is building a reputation in country-rock circles. "Conway called me up to say how much he liked the version," he says.

Gordon's intense controlled performance makes his retrospective act an almost eerie experience but he just likes to call himself a "student of rock 'n' roll".

Born 32 years ago in Washington, D.C, he developed a taste for rockabilly at a young age, listening to obscure radio stations playing discs by the likes of Gene Vincent and Jack Scott. By the mid-1960s, he immersed himself in soul music and after he hit New York in 1970, Gordon became identified with the burgeoning New Wave.

"I dropped out of that," he says now, "because I thought it was too aggressive for no good reason. It wasn't convincing enough for me, so I've stuck with songs that generally don't go past the mid-1960s."

For his first two albums, he teamed up with legendary rock 'n' roll guitarist Link Wray, who was backing Del Shannon among others on road shows during rock 'n' roll's beginnings. The discs attracted a cult following, but Wray's departure prompted Gordon to seek out a British contemporary, super-guitarist Chris Spedding, who shared a love of roots rock.

Says Gordon: "I felt a bit lost after Link left, but Chris has worked out so well. His big strength is his versatility, but he's got a real feeling for the music, too."

Behind the retro trappings, Gordon extends the original rock 'n' roll forms. His vocals are carefully worked interpretations, while Spedding's guitar fillets are like miniature artworks.

"And we're getting into the visual thing a bit more," says the performer whose styles are pure throwbacks to the 1950s, particularly the *Black Slacks* he sings about in his latest release.

Gordon says that all he has time to do on this large tour is visit record stores. "If I can squeeze the time, I try to track down a store that sells oldies."

After his Montreal date, Gordon hits New York for what he describes as "a couple of very important shows" and then it's off to Europe, where he's toured twice before to screaming adulation. —*Juan Rodriguez*

Country music's Flatt dies at 64

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (UPI) — Veteran country music performer Lester Flatt, who performed for 25 years as half of the famed bluegrass duo of Flatt and Scruggs, died at a hospital yesterday following a long illness.

Flatt, 64, who had a coronary bypass operation in 1975, had been undergoing treatment at Baptist Hospital since April 23 for what hospital spokesman Paul Moore described as "treatment and evaluation of a heart condition."

Flatt's condition worsened yesteday morning and he was moved to the intensive care section of the hospital.

"Lester Flatt expired at 1:20 (CST) this afternoon," Moore said. "The cause of death was heart failure."

Flatt and banjo picker Earl Scruggs teamed in 1948 and split in 1969 for reasons that were never disclosed. They played engagements ranging from country carnivals to Carnegie Hall.

Touring the country with their band, the Foggy Mountain Boys, they became famous for their *Foggy Mountain Breakdown*, the theme for the movie *Bonnie and Clyde* and the *Ballad of Jed Clampett* from the *Beverly Hillbillies* television series.

Flatt's professional career began in 1944 when he was hired as the lead singer for Bill Monroe's "Bluegrass Boys." After he joined with Scruggs in April of 1948, they became one of the most famous teams in the history of country music.

After the partnership dissolved in 1969, the band members remained with Flatt to form a group known as "The Nashville Grass."

Flatt continued to perform at more than 50 colleges a year until illness forced him to cut back his schedule.

Flatt had been talking about returning to the stage of the Grand Ole Opry and a possible reunion with Scruggs, who visited him in the hospital.

"Earl and I hadn't spoken in 10 years until the other day," Flatt said in an interview Feb. 27. "But when I was in the hospital, Earl came to see me. It came as quite a surprise and made me feel real good."

Scruggs, who now performs with his own bluegrass group called "The Earl Scruggs Review," expressed deep sorrow at the passing of his old friend.

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